

LEADER'S ROLE IN STRENGTHENING THE COMMUNITY: THE CASE OF 10 COMMUNITIES AT DRUSKININKAI MUNICIPALITY

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Abstract

Purpose – The goal of the article is to distinguish the key skills and characteristics of a leader aiming a successfully developing community.

Design/methodology/approach – A quantitative analysis of empirical data was carried out. The method of the research – a questionnaire-based survey and descriptive statistical analysis. The generalized results of the research are presented in diagrams and tables.

Findings – It was determined that in order to be an effective leader in rural communities, a person should be highly initiative and motivated to work for the prosperity of the community. Also, characteristics of responsibility, energy, and ability to summon the members of the community to seek for common goals were distinguished. The results of the research also revealed that trust in the leader is higher in communities that are highly focused on the goal. The respondents link the leader's ability to rally the members of the community to focus on a goal with better effectiveness of project execution, more successful attraction of funding for activities, better representation of the community members' interests and strengthening of the community itself.

Research limitations/implications – the research was conducted in a frame of a single Lithuanian region – 10 communities in Druskininkai municipality were examined. Due to this limitation, we can only evaluate the insights of the research as general tendencies.

Practical implications – the results of this research may be beneficial to community leaders in strengthening their communities and improving the quality of their activities.

Originality/Value – based on the results of the research, the authors compiled a concept of leadership expression in rural communities, the purpose of which is to motivate teamwork in rural communities by developing leadership, strengthen the communities and improve the quality of their activities. The article is based on a new approach to a community leader's ability to reach results relevant to the community.

Keywords: leadership, rural community.

Research type: original research.

JEL classification: R1, Y1, I31, Z20.

Introduction

Rural areas are seeing a revival in Lithuania, rural communities are naturally creating. Their activities are supported by the state region municipalities and organizations interested in rural development. As Atkočiūnienė and Štareikė (2016 p.12) state, “the process of rural area

development is becoming more open, complex and dependent on various interested sides: local residents, government, activity groups, private business, various associations, rural tourists and other individuals' decisions and actions". Community leaders initiate project activities, rally members and assist in reaching goals set by the community. Thus, leaders have an essential influence on community progress (Martiskainen, 2017; Haus et al., 2004). Therefore, the aim of the article is to distinguish the key skills and characteristics of a leader aiming a successfully developing community.

The data for the research was gathered via a survey questionnaire. Based on the results of the research, a conceptual model of leadership building in rural communities is compiled.

The article consists of four parts. The first part analyzes the impact of leadership in non-governmental organizations and rural communities, the second part presents the methodology of the research. The third part discusses the results of the research. Finally, the fourth part presents the conclusions of the research.

1. The goals of leadership in non-governmental organizations and rural communities: a theoretical review

In an ever improving and dynamic life of a community, a communal organization is oriented to the future and it is extremely important that it is reliably managed (Diska, 2009). A leader should possess practical knowledge on how to solve everyday issues that the members of organization face (Anderson and Peter, 2017). Leader's passion for leading is the main element of gaining people's trust, organizing activity and realizing social mission (Thorgren and Omoredede 2015). Only the leaders who are not afraid of breaking barriers and creating new goals provide the community members with optimism and connect them for joint activity (Sedikides and Campbell, 2017). Beinecke (2009) states that leadership is an interaction between persuading and showing positive example, between leader and his followers in order to reach a common goal of the team or leader. Leaders inspire their organizations to seek fulfilling their dreams which seemed impossible only a couple of years ago. Leaders are able to stand out of their group and take on the responsibility not due to their rights but because they prove their ability to lead and influence people. Leadership is comprehended as group leadership rather than personal because it involves other people (Vilkaitė - Vaitonė et al., 2016). Leadership that is considered a process rather than ratio of power is attained through strengthening the process of shared leadership (Sousa and Van Dierendonck, 2016).

The research of Leliūgienė and Mačiulskaitė (2013) shows that leadership is an ability to unite and motivate the members of an organization to seek common goals for the well-being of the organization while the organization's leader should possess a wide spectrum of personal characteristics and abilities. Analyzing the leadership process, Masiulis and Sudnickas (2008) and

Diržytė et al. (2010) describe the leader's goal as creating an appropriate environment in which separate individuals or teams take on the initiative in order to fulfil the organization's vision. Thus, leadership enables people to come closer to their goal. Other authors note that leadership is comprehended as a group rather than personal phenomenon which includes other people into the organization's activity (Vilkaitė-Vaitonė, et al., 2016). The most recent research once again confirm that an organization can only reach excellent results when its leader rallies people for common goal and motivates them to go one step higher in order to create shared values (Rendson, et al., 2018). Therefore, it can be stated that traditional leadership, i. e. leadership connected to commanding is not efficient anymore. Members of modern organizations wish to take on meaningful activities personally, thus a successful leader is not one who commands but one who motivates employees to reach their goals and through that – organizational goals. Such approach is called collaborative leadership. It is a joint work of leader and his followers. By collaborating, the leader focuses on team success, creates team atmosphere and attempts to connect the interests of each team member with the organizational goal (Raišienė, 2014).

Scientific publications dedicate significant attention to leadership research particularly in rural communities. Aleksandravičius and Žukovskis (2011) note that one of the most important goals of rural community leader is to move local inhabitants from their everyday routine, rally them for joint activity, motivate them to look for ways to solve their economic, social, environmental, cultural life and education problems. Other researches emphasize that a leader in rural communities should be different from other members of the community – more interesting, smarter, communicative, able to work, happy and possessing a strong system of moral values. People who are fascinated with leader's work become his followers. Leaders in rural areas can be authorities who are respected, trusted, followed and are an example to others (Skurdenienė and Šeškauskaitė, 2014). Quick decisions are not of significant importance, but quick reaction and trust helps to earn the required attention (Goffee and Jones, 2007).

The recent decades, involving communal organization into the country's public sector is an extremely relevant topic. Lithuania's progress strategy "Lithuania 2030" foresees strategies that emphasize strengthening non-governmental sector's organizations (NGOs), enabling organization members in making decisions on topics relevant to the country. The essential aspect of NGO existence is a well-developed voluntary activity of their members. Due to this reason, stimulating volunteering is one of the most important tasks of a community leader (Aleksandravičius and Žukovskis, 2011). On the other hand, the survival of NGOs is dependent not only on internal but also external factors which communities more easily overcome by collaborating, realizing common goals and protecting common interests. Thus, another key task of a leader is to represent the community in external environment, incorporate the community into other, bigger NGOs as their

support is critical in strengthening the community and satisfying the expectations of all its members. From a functional point of view, an important factor is governmental support to the community through various projects (Stanaitytė, 2016). Through projects, communities are able to effectively re-orientate their activities according to the needs of their members (Little et al., 2016) knowing and evaluating which is essential in foreseeing the direction of further changes. Considering this fact, one more essential goal of a leader is evident: to form the interpersonal relations of community members and ensure productive relations in the activity process (Rezvani et al., 2016). Leadership in a community is an ability to influence the members to work on organizational goals enthusiastically and confidently (Drucker, 2004).

In conclusion, it could be stated that leadership researchers distinguish three key areas of leader's focus: 1) ensuring productive relations between community members; 2) rallying community members and organizing joint activity to reach the goals of the community and 3) representing and protecting the community's interests by uniting and collaborating with other NGOs.

2. Research methodology

Prosperous countryside is an important condition in reaching inhabitant and country well-being and development. In 2008, Druskininkai municipality council and communal organizations established the "Druskininkai local activity group" (short VVG in Lithuanian) which is a tool that helps solve rural area problems and stimulate initiatives in rural territories of Druskininkai municipality. For more than 10 years, the region sees rapid changes that strengthen local communities that, through their activities, contribute to a more interesting, meaningful life and better local infrastructure. Rural communities are being motivated to become involved into project activities, join various programs and receive funding for their activities. One of the programs that receives a quite big funding in terms of rural areas is a program called "Leader" which is focused to community needs. It should be noted that thanks to this program, more innovative ways of solving problems in rural communities are being discovered (Espancia et al. 2015). The leaders of rural communities play a huge role and are responsible for rallying community members and initiating projects based on common interests. Therefore, the participants of our research evaluated the heads of communities they represent.

Quantitative research was invoked to gather empirical data. The method of the research is a questionnaire survey which presents statements formed based on theoretical analysis.

The questions of the questionnaire are dedicated to finding out the respondents' attitude to leadership expression in their communities. During the survey, the respondents were asked to express their opinion on leader's characteristics, trust in the leader, expression of leader's influence

and team leadership (Table 1). In addition, questions about demographics were asked: the respondent's age, gender and duration of membership in the community. Due to the fact that no significant differences in answers were found out between different age and gender groups, the results of the research are examined as a whole.

Table 1. Substantiation of the questionnaire

The research facet	What is being ascertained?	Theoretical background
Leaders' characteristics	Respondents' opinion on rural community leaders' characteristics, distinguish key characteristics	Anderson, Peter, 2017; Thorgren, Omoredė, 2015; Sedikides, Campbell, 2017; Leliūgienė, Mačiulskaitė, 2013.
Trust in the leader	Respondents' opinion on the importance of trusting the leader and general situation regarding trusting the leader in communities	Thorgren, Omoredė 2015; Skurdenienė, Šeškauskaitė, 2014; Goffee, Jones, 2007.
Leader's influence	How community leaders' influence is expressed, and which aspects are important for the expression	Leliūgienė, Mačiulskaitė, 2013; Sousa, Van Dierendonck 2016; Rendson, et al., 2018; Skurdenienė, Šeškauskaitė, 2014; Rezvani et al., 2016; Drucker, 2004; Minelgaitė, Vaičiukynaitė, 2017.
Team leadership	Key principles of team leadership according to respondents	Sedikides, Campbell, 2017; Beinecke, 2009; Vilkaitė-Vaitonė et al., 2016; Raišienė, 2014; Aleksandravičius, Žukovskis, 2011.

Source: (the authors).

The respondents were asked to evaluate the questions following the five-point Likert scale where 1 is the least important and 5 is the most important.

The research results were analyzed by invoking the method of descriptive statistics. Generalized results of the research are provided in diagrams and tables.

Research population. 10 rural communities in Druskininkai municipality consisting of 695 members.

Sample of the research. The sample of the research is one of the key factors influencing the reliability of results. Usually, in order to ensure reliability of the research, a 5 percent margin of error is applied, i. e. a reliability of 95 percent is sought (Kardelis, 2014). To determine the size of the sample, Paniott's formula was invoked:

$$n=1/(\Delta^2+1/N),$$

where n – size of the sample; Δ – sample margin of error; N – general size of the entirety.

Inserting the values into the formula, a sample size of 254 was received. Taking into consideration that part of the questionnaires may return unfilled and a part of the respondents refuse

to fill in the questionnaire, the internet link to the questionnaire was sent to all community members who have an e-mail. A total of 450 complete questionnaires were returned.

The survey was conducted in February of 2019. The questionnaire was located in an online platform.

3. Research results and findings

A total of 450 respondents participated in the research, 163 (36 percent) of them men and 287 (64 percent) women. Respondent distribution by age revealed that most of the respondents were in the age group of 36 to 45 years old (37 percent), a less respondent (30 percent) were in the age group of 26 to 35 years. 12 percent of the respondents who participated in the research were from 46 to 55 years old and the same amount (12 percent) were older than 55 years old. The least part of the respondents was between the age of 18 and 25 (9 percent).

The majority of the respondents were members of a rural community for 4 to 10 years (50 percent). 26 percent of the respondents were members of rural communities for more than 10 years. Distribution of respondents who are community members for under 1 year and from 1 to 3 years is similar (12 percent). Having analyzed the gathered data, an assumption could be made that the majority of the respondents who indicated their age as 46 years and more are members of the community for a longer time while the respondents who are between 26 and 35 years old are community members for 1 to 3 years.

During the research, characteristics that according to the respondents a leader should possess were evaluated (Table 2). By evaluating the characteristics as important or less important, the respondents distinguished a few characteristics as extremely important: leader's initiative and motivation; ability to focus people on a common goal; responsibility and energy.

A more detailed analysis showed that the statement that 77.4 percent of the respondents "completely agreed" that leader's initiative and motivation is important, and 22.6 percent "agreed". Not a single respondent disagreed with this statement. Furthermore, the respondents noted that leader's responsibility is very important (73.6 percent), while 75.5 percent of the respondents claimed that a leader should be able to focus people on a common goal. Leader's energy and determination were also noted as important – 71.7 percent "completely agreed" while 24.5 percent "agreed". Creativity was also identified as important (64 percent). However, 7.7 percent of the respondents noted that they "neither agree nor disagree" with this statement which means that they are doubtful about the importance of this characteristic's importance for a rural community leader. Charisma and communicability were also identified as very important (66 percent) along with diligence (69.8 percent). The importance of all the characteristics mentioned above were agreed upon by all survey participants and not a single respondent claimed that they disagree or completely

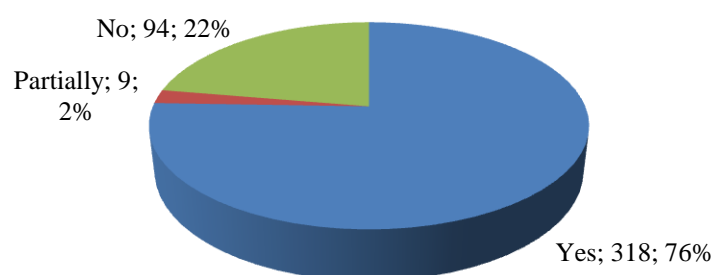
disagree on their importance. 3.8 percent of respondents identified that they neither agree nor disagree with characteristics such as energy and determination, showing example, intellect and being and authority. Another 3.8 percent doubt the importance of these characteristics in rural communities.

Table 2. Key characteristics needed for leaders in rural community

Characteristics	Completely agree %	Agree %	Neither agree nor disagree %	Disagree %	Completely disagree %
Responsibility	73,6	26,4	0,0	0,0	0,0
Energy, determination	71,7	24,5	3,8	0,0	0,0
Diligence	69,8	30,2	0,0	0,0	0,0
Intellect	55,6	40,7	3,7	0,0	0,0
Showing example to others	60,4	35,8	3,8	0,0	0,0
Creating an atmosphere of trust	62,3	35,8	1,9	0,0	0,0
Being an authority	61,5	34,7	3,8	0,0	0,0
Ability to maintain positive relationship with members of the society	66,7	33,3	0,0	0,0	0,0
Ability to work in a team	66,0	32,0	2,0	0,0	0,0
Creativity	64,0	28,3	7,7	0,0	0,0
Ability to focus people on a common goal	75,5	24,5	0,0	0,0	0,0
Initiative	77,4	20,8	1,8	0,0	0,0
Motivation to work for common well-being	77,4	22,6	0,0	0,0	0,0
Charisma and communicability	66,0	34,0	0,0	0,0	0,0
Self-confidence	61,3	36,8	1,9	0,0	0,0

Source: (the authors).

According researchers (e.g. Thorgren, Omorede 2015), interpersonal trust is a vitally important aspect in organizations. Also, 97 % of our respondents agreed that the trust in leader is of higher importance for rural communities. Nevertheless, 76 percent of the respondents claimed that they trust their leader whereas 22 percent of respondents indicated that they do not trust their leader (Fig. 1).



Source: (the authors).

Figure 1. The facet of trust in a leader

Further, the aspect of leader influence was analyzed. The respondents were asked to choose the most important area of leader's influence for the best results in seeking the common goals in community. The gathered results show that leader's influence should be related to taking responsibility and increasing motivation (Table 3). 28 percent of the respondents noted that the leader should perform his duties with great quality. The statement that the leader should form group's motivation was supported by 33 percent of the respondents while 26 percent of the questioned noted that the leader should structure and organize the work in the community, and to follow rules. Thus, survey results reveal that leader's influence is related to increasing members' motivation, qualitative performance of duties and work structuration and organization.

Table 3. The facet of a leader's influence

Name of the category	Value
Leader performs his duties with great quality	28 %
Leader structurizes and organizes work in the community and follows rules	26 %
Leader forms group's motivation	33 %
Wouldn't indicate the most important one	13 %

Source: (the authors).

We also tried to evaluate the facet of team leadership (Table 4). The respondents ranked indicators according to their importance. The most important indicator, according to the respondents is positive atmosphere in the community (73.6 percent). Also, 62.7 percent of respondents think that equality of all members and each member's ability to influence decision making is an important indicator.

Table 4. The facet of team leadership

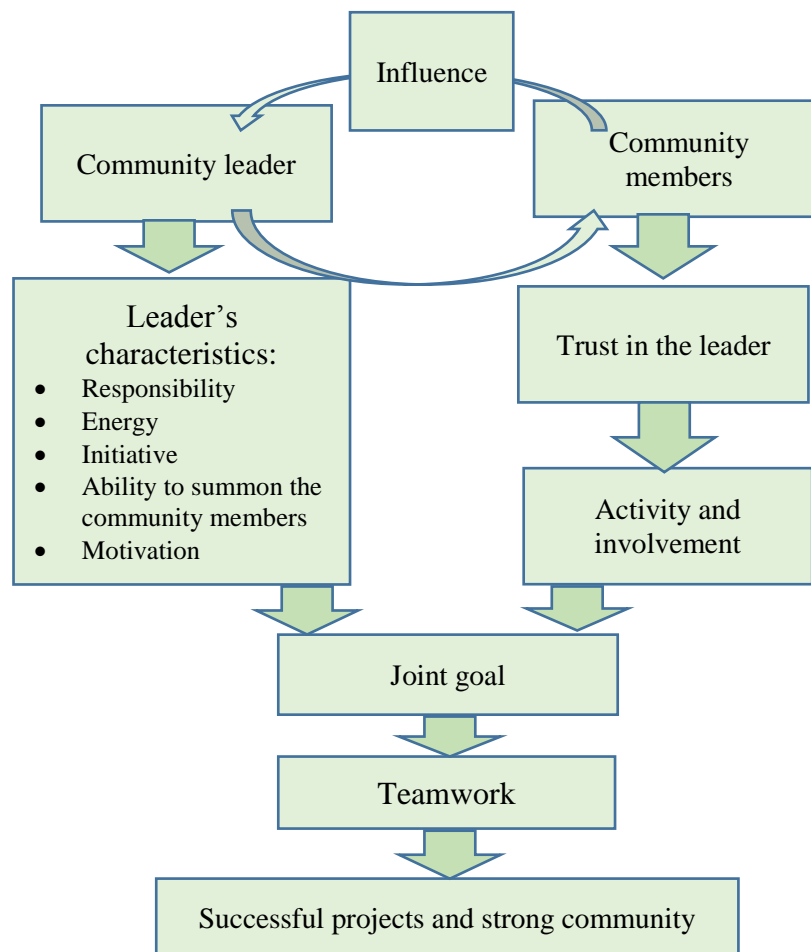
Aspect	The part of completely agreeing respondents
Positive atmosphere in the community	73,6 %
Time savings, more effective task completion	26,9 %
All members are equally important in the community	62,7 %
Each member of the community can influence joint decision making	62,7 %
Quality of community goal realization	55,8 %

Source: (the authors).

The results of the research allow to assume that the rural community leader should be proactive and motivated to work for the well-being of the community. In addition, the leader should be able to focus the members of the community on a common goal. It should be noted that collaborative work is more predominant in communities where members trust their leader.

Having summarized the results of theoretical and empirical research, a concept of leadership building in rural communities was compiled (Fig. 2), the purpose of which is to help better

understand the factors of leader's impact on strengthening rural communities: improving team-work and seeking for better results of communal activities.



Source: the authors.

Figure 2. The concept of leadership building in rural communities

The concept is based on the results of the research and consists of the following main aspects: leader's and community members' interpersonal influence, which determines trust in the leader. The leader possesses characteristics such as responsibility, determination, motivation and ability to focus everyone on a common goal. Active involvement of community members and leader's ability to focus members motivates to work on a common goal. Another part of the concept is the common goal. When everyone has a common goal and is able to work in a team, projects are carried out successfully, funding is attracted, member interests are represented and thus the community grows bigger, stronger and reaches excellent results.

Conclusions

Three areas are of key importance for community leaders in developing the community: 1) ensuring productive relations between community members; 2) rallying community members and organizing joint activity to reach community goals, and 3) representing and protecting the community interests by uniting and collaborating with other NGOs.

The results of the research revealed that a leader in a community should possess characteristics such as responsibility, energy, and ability to summon the community members in reaching for common goals. Also, the leader should be able to form the community members' motivation to seek for these goals. The research also showed that the best way for successfully develop activity of communities should be organized via strategy of team collaboration.

Based on the results of the research, the conceptual model of leadership building in rural communities was compiled. It allows to better understand the rural community leaders' role in order to reach the expected results of community activities.

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